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Walt Disney's War On The Perception of Propaganda

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This paper focuses on the influence of World War I and Nazi propaganda on American propaganda during World War II. I specifically analyzed the use of propaganda through the means of film using Walt Disney cartoons. What fueled the effectiveness of propaganda in film? Why were cartoons so intense? What methods did the producers employ in the features? I also wanted to look at the influence of Nazi propaganda on its counterpart, American propaganda. The majority of the focus on propaganda centered around Frank Capra's "Why We Fight Series." The focus on cartoons as a means of propaganda largely faded into obscurity. Disney took on the task of making propaganda more palatable to the American people through the use of cartoons. American public opinion on propaganda influenced the characteristics and themes of each cartoon. Disney utilized four methods to accomplish their purpose: the use of color, theme, humor, and music.

Propaganda

Propaganda is the dispersion of ideas. A more specific definition in this context is "the dissemination of ideas intended to convince people to think and act in a particular way and a particular persuasive purpose." Propaganda takes on one of two forms: subtle or blatant. Subtle propaganda utilizes clever and indirect methods to achieve something. Blatant propaganda employs obvious, open and abrasive methods. Mass media ignited the major use of propaganda developed in the twentieth century. Propaganda grew during times of conflict and change and became a major tool for promotion and justification during World War I and World War II.

World War I

During the first World War, people developed a negative perception of propaganda.

Governments used it as a weapon during the war and later it affected the structure of its use during the Second World War. Governments realized the power of press and used it to their advantage. By the end of World War I, citizens felt manipulated. The following are a few examples of World War I posters: Your money or his life- the use of underlining and the picture of a dying soldier in nurse's arms. An Enlistment poster touted the army's position of training the mind, but as soldiers came back after the war with shell shock, civilians altered their beliefs feeling the army lied to them. This distrust of propaganda only grew with its use by the Nazi regime.

World War II

The use of propaganda became more tactical during World War II. As radio and film continued to develop between the wars, they became more influential than posters and printed items. They effectively became the two most important forms of propaganda.

Nazi Propaganda

The Nazi Party led the way in the use of propaganda. Adolf Hitler considered it a vital part of Germany's war effort. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler wrote two chapters on propaganda. He believed propaganda should be direct, simple and clear. It should appeal to emotion not reason. Hitler had black and white ideas and no room existed for various interpretations. In his mind, this was a key part to the use of propaganda. German propaganda focused on the home front and molding the minds of millions of German citizens.

The genius behind Nazi propaganda was Dr. Paul Josef Goebbels, the Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. Through his work he allowed, "[t]he resentments, strengths and contradictions of Nazi wartime ideology [to] find their most powerful and significant

expression. . . .”He spread the Nazi ideology to every German citizen. According to Welch, Goebbels felt his job was to “coordinate the political will of the nation with the aims of the Nazi states.” Goebbels accomplished this through the mass media using radio, film, books, leaflets, illustrated and word press, posters, placards, brochures, and “whisper” or “word of mouth” propaganda coordinating campaigns by party speakers.

Goebbels produced all propaganda used by the Nazi regime. He made use of documentaries, feature films, short subjects, and travelogues. He maintained the entertainment value of films while injecting subtle uses of propaganda promoting the Nazi cause.

Hitler and Goebbels both knew the “propaganda potential of the cinema must be exploited to the full...” Goebbels combined mediums within propaganda campaigns. An example of this is found in *The Eternal Jew*. Figure 1.3 advertises the new documentary, *The Eternal Jew*. Its use of black and green colors represented evil. They depicted the Jew as menacing. The poster also emphasized the Jewish man’s large nose as a way to identify Jews. The film incorporated the use of live footage shot in the Jewish Ghettos to portray the stereotypical Jew: dark eyes, dark hair and large noses. Throughout the film the narrator uses inflammatory speech appealing to the viewers’ emotions especially fear.

The Nazis expertly relayed their simple, clear and manipulated message. Devoid of humor, Nazi propaganda used color to give the viewer a negative connotation of the topic. They did not use bright and happy colors to promote their lies and misinformation. In leaflets, pamphlets, and brochures, they did not use anything too crude or sensational. Goebbels and his ministry censored every form of mass media. Some propaganda produced by Goebbels and his ministry used subtly, but he later moved to a blatant form when it became imperative to convince

the German people of the war effort.

Walt Disney Studios played a crucial role in the war effort. He desired to contribute to the war effort, but also sought to keep his company afloat during the war. He used government contracts as his major means of cash flow. These contracts allowed him to keep cash flowing but also protected his employees from being drafted.

Walt Disney Studios used art and animation to aid the United States government. The United States Department of the Treasury hired Disney to create educational cartoons after seeing the success of a Canadian cartoon: *Donald's Decision*. They hired Disney to make a similar short for the United States. Disney created *The New Spirit*, starring Donald Duck promoting an income tax form. The cartoon encourages Americans to pay their income tax to produce cash flow to advance the war effort.

The Department of Agriculture enlisted Disney to produce a short portraying the importance of American farmers and American food production. American agriculture played a vital role in achieving victory. The topic of food and the war effort carried over into Disney's next cartoon, *Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Firing Line*.

The Conservation Division of the War Production Board hired Disney to create a cartoon about preserving fats. Minnie and Pluto star in this cartoon encouraging ladies to save their cooking fats. The military used glycerin from these fats to produce ammunition and explosives. Pluto reluctantly agrees to sacrifice his fats until he sees his friend, Mickey Mouse, in uniform. Sacrificing his fats meant another box of bullets for Mickey Mouse symbolizing another box of bullets for the boys at the front of the war effort.

Der Fuehrer's Face won an Oscar for Best Short Subject. The cartoon took aim at the

ridiculous nature of Nazi ideology. The most popular of Walt Disney's war cartoons also emphasized the importance of American patriotism. Disney followed *Der Fuehrer's Face* with *Education for Death*, which dealt with Nazi ideology in a far different way.

Education for Death lacks the humorous element of *Der Fuehrer's Face*. This intense cartoon took a far more serious tone. Adapted from a book by Gregor Ziemer, Disney studios escalated their cartoons to dealing with difficult war topics. In this cartoon, he shows how the Nazis warped the minds of children and the harshness and brutality of the Nazi state. Disney continued to deal with these Nazi methods in *Reason and Emotion*.

Reason and Emotion, nominated for the Oscar for Best Short Subject, focused on the internal battle between reason and emotion. The cartoon begins in the mind of a child, where emotion lives alone because reason has yet to develop. After a couple of scenarios, reason arrives. This cartoon shows the consequences of decisions when emotion knocks out reason and takes control. The setting switches from peacetime to wartime, focusing on how Hitler manipulated emotions in the minds of the German people. The cartoon promotes the idea that emotions cannot be the controlling factor in the minds of Americans. Emotion must not trump logical reasoning.

This idea of reason over emotion carries over into another Walt Disney propaganda cartoon, *Chicken Little*. The new adaption of *Chicken Little* takes a far more serious turn than any other adaption. Hitler targeted the weak to manipulate the masses. The fox represents Hitler and Chicken Little portrays the weak minded. The cartoon highlights once again the danger of emotional manipulation.

These seven cartoons portray the best examples of what Walt Disney did to make

propaganda more palatable. Some also serve as examples for what Disney did not do to make the American people more receptive to the ideas embedded in the features. The cartoons made the actions and ideals more palatable by focusing on the actions and ideas as defense against the Nazis. Disney balanced their presentation when the narrator used a serious tone by using humor, music and color. The studio received criticism when Disney took a more serious and blatant approach because Goebbels and the Nazis primarily used the blatant method.

Disney produced every war cartoon in color while other studios did not. Because of this approach, Disney and his studio stood out. They pioneered the use of color before World War II. Walt Disney brought in a psychologist and learned about the effect of color. He used color in the cartoons to relay ideas and bolster the positive receptivity and reaction. Through the use of color, Disney denoted villains and heroes in propaganda cartoons and in feature films.

While every cartoon used color, three of the best examples are *Der Fuehrer's Face*, *Food Will Win the War*, and *Education for Death*. In the *Der Fuehrer's Face*, the use of color depicts the villain by making Nutsy Land in greens and greys (Figure 2.2). Red and orange when mixed produced a menacing look (Figure 2.1). The use of these colors produces a sky that is dull and sickly in appearance. Disney used various colors to produce a positive or negative association with a subject depending on his topic (Figure 2.4).

Food Will Win the War used color to show the glory of American food production. They used blue, yellow, red and white as the main colors in the cartoon as the narrator detailed statistics and production (Figure 2.7). Animators used darker colors when the focus shifted to food in relation to battle. The green and grey combination seen to depict Nazis in *Der Fuehrer's Face* depict Axis powers in this cartoon (Figure 2.6). The battle scenes show green and gray

Axis submarines in the water while bright yellow Allied planes fill the bright, blue sky. Here, the bright, blue sky sets a positive tone unlike the sickly, green sky in *Der Fuehrer's Face*.

Several recurring themes run throughout the propaganda shorts. Disney loved to promote patriotism. Every cartoon touched in some way on this theme. Some of the best examples are from *The New Spirit*, *Food Will Win the War*, and *Der Fuehrer's Face*. In *The New Spirit*, the opening sequence contains a song about the new Yankee doodle spirit which encourages patriotism. The entire short portrays Donald Duck as extremely patriotic through his willingness to do absolutely anything to take part in the war effort (Figure 3.1).

Food Will Win the War employed the use of patriotic music. The depiction of the American Flag reoccurs in this cartoon. This is another example of Disney's patriotism. *Der Fuehrer's Face* also contains several points encouraging patriotism. Donald Duck wears American flag pajamas, and blue and white starred wallpaper adorns the walls of his house. American flag curtains cover his windows. A Statue of Liberty on top of his American Flag tablecloth further symbolizes his patriotism. The actions Disney's characters take in the various cartoons such as paying taxes, donating fats, and even listening to reason over emotion are portrayed as patriotic. The cartoons glorify a patriotic attitude and portray patriotic acts as heroism. This leads to another recurring theme; the smallest act makes a big impact on the war effort.

Two Disney shorts convey this *The New Spirit* and *Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Firing Line*. In *The New Spirit*, the simple act of paying taxes is elevated to a vital part of the war effort. The Canadian war bond shorts show money being turned into victory because unselfish citizens gave their money. *Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Firing Line*, pushed this idea

further by asking housewives to simply save fats. The cartoon shows that saving fats does not cost them anything and actually provides them with more money. The portrait of Mickey in uniform reminds them that their wiliness to save fats provided an Allied soldier with more bullets for their guns.

The cartoons encourage civilians to take part in small acts to help the war effort. Glorifying the acts and portraying them as the height of patriotism appealed to the audience. Disney made many of the cartoons ideas more agreeable by focusing on them as a method of defense against the Nazis. These showed the danger of Nazi ideology and encouraged Americans to protect themselves from these dangers. *Education for Death*, *Reason and Emotion*, and *Chicken Little* employed these methods more than any other cartoon.

Education for Death, *Reason and Emotion*, and *Chicken Little* addressed Nazi ideology and Hitler's manipulation of information to achieve his aims. *Education for Death* blatantly portrays the harshness of the Nazi state. This short highlighted the idea that the Nazis taught brutality. Throughout the cartoon, Nazi ideals instill fear into the minds of the viewer. The writer's goal in this short: the Nazi's must be stopped. The rabbit scene shows how the Nazi's brainwashed the German people (show clip). The teacher and Han's classmates stomp out his sympathy for the weak and they warp his way of thinking.

Reason and Emotion encouraged the viewer to be a good American and choose reason over emotion. Anyone who failed to do this became like the Nazis choosing emotion over reason. One of Hitler's personal views of propaganda involved a person embracing emotion instead of reason. The cartoon emphasized to the viewer to act based on logical thought instead of emotion.

In *Chicken Little*, the methods the Fox employed to get his meal all came from the book on psychology. The Fox influenced Chicken Little whipping him into a state of panic based off of emotion which spreads to the rest of the coup. Instead of listening to the voice of reason (Cocky Locky), Chicken Little chose to follow emotion. Hitler targeted specific groups with certain lies to accomplish his goals, just like Foxy Loxy in this cartoon. The entire cartoon warns against this method. The cartoon encouraged Americans to choose carefully to whom they listen and the ideas they choose to believe.

Disney used humor to make all of these cartoons acceptable to most Americans. Cartoons without a lot of humor received criticism like *Education for Death*. On the other hand, *Der Fuehrer's Face* dealt with the harshness of the Nazi state and Americans received it better because of the abundance of humor. Cartoonist drew Nazi officials as red faced and comical when they got angry about something. In *Education for Death*, the teacher's face turned red because Hans expressed sympathy for the rabbit (Figure 3.2). Disney used humor to depict Hitler and Goebbels in the classroom. They drew Goebbels as a green and decomposing figure (Figure 3.3/3.4). In *Reason and Emotion*, Hitler spoke with a high-pitched tone with a red face screaming in "German" while jumping up and down. In *Der Fuehrer's Face* the Japanese emperor briefly appears as a short figure with buckteeth and glasses (Figure 3.5).

All the cartoons used patriotic music including *The New Spirit* and *Food Will Win the War*. The music set the tone in the cartoons. In *Food Will Win the War*, Disney promoted patriotism through food production. When the narrator discussed serious topics, Disney used upbeat patriotic music to offset the serious tone. In *Education for Death*, the music turns menacing at the end of the cartoon as Hans becomes a full-fledge Nazi. Disney did not just use music to show serious moments but humorous ones as well. *Der Fuehrer's Face* displayed the

best example of humor and music working in tandem. Disney used music to provide humor.

The cartoon, *Der Fuehrer's Face*, gained its name from the song. The lyrics are as follows:

When der Fuehrer says we is de master race. We Heil! We Heil! ^[T]_[SEP]Right in der Fuehrer's face. When Herr Goebbels says we own the world and space.

We Heil! We Heil! Right in Herr Goebbels face. When Herr Goring says they'll never bomb dis place. We Heil! We Heil! Right in Herr Goring's face. Is we not the supermen? Aryan pure supermen? Ja, we is the supermen, super duper supermen. Is this Nutsy land so good? Would you leave it if you could? Ja, this Nutsy land is good we would leave it if we could. We bring the world new order. Heil! Hitler's world to order.

Everyone of foreign race will love der Fuehrer's face. When we bring to the world disorder. When der Fuehrer says we is de master race We Heil! We Heil!

Right in der Fuehrer's face. Not to love the Fuehrers is a great disgrace so We Heil! We Heil! Right in der Fuehrer's face, We Heil! We Heil! Right in der Fuehrer's face, When der Fuehrer says we is de master race We Heil! We Heil! Right in der Fuehrer's face. When der Fuehrer yells I got to have more shells. We Heil! We Heil! For him we make more shells. If one little shell should blow him right to ...(ding) We Heil! Heil! And wouldn't that be swell.

This song lightens the topic of the cartoon but also mocks Nazi ideology. When a band member asked the group if they would leave Nutsy Land if they could, they reply, "yes it is good but we would leave it if we could." It is a song packed with humor and contradictions. *Der Fuehrer's Face* is the best example of the methods Disney employed to make propaganda palatable to Americans.